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Psychological Features of Extreme Political Ideologies

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Abstract

In this article, we examine psychological features of extreme political ideologies. In what ways are political left- and right-wing extremists similar to one another and different from moderates? We propose and review four interrelated propositions that explain adherence to extreme political ideologies from a psychological perspective. We argue that (a) psychological distress stimulates adopting an extreme ideological outlook; (b) extreme ideologies are characterized by a relatively simplistic, black-and-white perception of the social world; (c) because of such mental simplicity, political extremists are overconfident in their judgments; and (d) political extremists are less tolerant of different groups and opinions than political moderates. In closing, we discuss how these psychological features of political extremists increase the likelihood of conflict among groups in society.

Keywords

political extremism, ideology, rigidity of the right, overconfidence, intolerance

In a polarizing political climate, citizens frequently experience a clash of values when debating pressing societal issues. A central question in political psychology has been how the general ideologies that represent these values drive human cognition, emotion, and behavior. Notably, the *rigidity-of-the-right* model stipulates that the political left and right differ in their cognitive styles, as reflected in increased closed-mindedness among individuals on the right (Jost, 2017). In recent years, however, researchers have increasingly recognized that not only political orientation but also political extremism meaningfully predict people's responses to societal and political events. We define political extremism as the extent to which regular citizens are polarized into, and strongly identify with, generic left- or right-wing ideological outlooks on society. In this article, we examine psychological features of extreme political ideologies. In what ways are political left- and right-wing extremists actually quite similar to one another and different from moderates?

The basic idea that left- and right-wing extremists share a range of psychological similarities is consistent with theories of extremism and radicalization (e.g., Kruglanski et al., 2014; see also Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; Hoffer,

1951). The goal of this article is to examine the psychology of extreme political ideologies by integrating these prior theoretical insights with recent findings. We specifically propose four interrelated psychological features that characterize political extremism. Moreover, although we do not dispute that political orientation predicts important psychological variables (e.g., acceptance of inequality), we illuminate how some psychological features that were historically attributed to the political right might more accurately be attributed to both political extremes.

Political Extremism: Four Psychological Features

Although we do not claim that the propositions reviewed here represent the only psychological features of political extremism, they are well supported by

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empirical evidence, have been frequently studied by psychologists, and jointly contribute to a parsimonious understanding of this phenomenon. We specifically examine the relationships between political extremism and (a) psychological distress, (b) cognitive simplicity, (c) overconfidence, and (d) intolerance.

Psychological distress

The basis of our argument is that psychological distress—defined as a sense of meaninglessness that stems from anxious uncertainty—stimulates adherence to extreme ideologies. This argument is consistent with *significance-quest* theory, which proposes that an important reason why people become radicalized is a quest for significance—the need to feel important and respected by supporting a meaningful cause (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Distressing personal or societal events (e.g., injustices, economic crises, wars) undermine the extent to which perceivers experience the world as meaningful and therefore stimulate people to regain a sense of purpose through strong and clear-cut ideological convictions. Although significance-quest theory was originally designed to explain terrorism, these processes also contribute to political extremism among regular citizens (Webber et al., 2018).

Empirical findings support a relationship between psychological distress and extreme political ideologies. Compared with moderates, political extremists—on both the left and right of the spectrum—report stronger anxiety about their economic future (van Prooijen, Krouwel, Boiten, & Eendebak, 2015). Furthermore, extremists are more suspicious than moderates about governmental institutions, suggesting distressed expectations of these institutions (Inglehart, 1987). Experimental findings are consistent with these insights. For instance, people psychologically compensate for feelings of uncertainty and fear through strong ideological convictions (McGregor, Prentice, & Nash, 2013), and inducing a loss of significance increases extreme beliefs on both the left and right (Webber et al., 2018).

The link between psychological distress and political extremism is inconsistent with the assumption of the rigidity-of-the-right model that psychological distress stimulates conservative ideologies only. We note, however, that psychological distress stimulates a preference for leaders who, in addition to being radical, are also group-oriented (Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010). Feelings of distress therefore make political currents that are not only extreme but also nationalistic particularly appealing. Indeed, the majority of studies indicating a right-wing shift under conditions of uncertainty were conducted in Western countries where the political currents that combine radicalism with nationalism happen to be right wing (e.g., the United States, several

European Union, or EU, member states; Jost, 2017). Would distress exert similar effects in countries where the political currents that combine radicalism with nationalism are mostly located on the left, such as Venezuela (i.e., Hugo Chavez and Nicolás Maduro), Ecuador (i.e., Evo Morales), or Nicaragua (i.e., Daniel Ortega; e.g., Müller, 2016)? In fact, only recently in Mexico—a country suffering from high murder rates, drug cartels, corruption, and economic distress—the left-wing populist and nationalist leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador won the presidential elections by a landslide.

Evidence indeed suggests that the link between distress and conservatism is much less straightforward than often assumed (Malka, Lelkes, & Holzer, 2017). For instance, a cross-national study suggests that security needs predict right-wing attitudes in countries with high levels of human development but left-wing attitudes in countries with low levels of human development; moreover, security needs predict culturally right-wing but economically left-wing attitudes (Malka, Soto, Inzlicht, & Lelkes, 2014). Furthermore, reminding people of their mortality can increase both extremism and conservatism (Burke, Kosloff, & Landau, 2013), but the conservative shifts observed in this research domain can alternatively be explained by increased nationalism following death reminders (Crawford, 2017). Finally, macropolitical analyses reveal that the main societal conditions preceding the rise of extremist regimes in the 20th century were characterized by ephemeral gains: a short-lived period of prosperity (e.g., territorial expansion, economic wealth) followed by critical losses. These distressing societal circumstances facilitated the momentum of not only fascist (extreme-right) but also communist (extreme-left) regimes (Midlarsky, 2011).

Psychological distress thus increases extremist beliefs and support for radical movements. The processes described here steer the electorate away from moderate ideologies and either polarize societies in both directions or yield left- or right-wing electoral shifts. The specific direction of these centrifugal effects is likely to depend on a complex mix of cultural, political, and historical factors that shape whether the ideological currents that combine radicalism with nationalism in a given community are located mostly on the political right, mostly on the political left, or on both ends of the political spectrum.

Cognitive simplicity

Second, we propose that extreme ideologies are characterized by a relatively simplistic, black-and-white perception of the social world. Feelings of distress prompt a desire for clarity, and extremist belief systems

provide meaning to a complex social environment through a set of straightforward assumptions that make the world more comprehensible (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006). These theoretical insights would therefore predict a link between political extremism and cognitive simplicity.

Empirical findings support this view. One classic study analyzed the content of speeches about slavery by politicians shortly before the U.S. Civil War and found decreased integrative complexity among relatively extreme politicians compared with political moderates (Tetlock, Armor, & Peterson, 1994). In a recent series of studies, participants consistently rated how similar or dissimilar they considered a range of social stimuli, including politicians, social groups, and newspapers. Compared with moderates, political extremists formed more sharply distinguished, homogenous clusters of similar versus dissimilar stimuli, suggesting that they perceive the social world in simpler and more clearly defined mental categories (Lammers, Koch, Conway, & Brandt, 2017).

Finally, evidence suggests that political extremists view societal and political events more simply. Although the political left and right endorsed diametrically different solutions to the EU refugee crisis (with the left being more inclusive and the right more exclusive toward refugees), both extremes believed that the solution to this crisis was simple—distinguishing them from moderates, who believed that more complex solutions were needed (van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Emmer, 2018). Such cognitive simplicity is also reflected in political extremists' tendency to believe conspiracy theories. Although the left and right are equally likely to endorse conspiracy theories (Uscinski & Parent, 2014), the political extremes believe conspiracy theories more strongly than moderates (van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015; see also Imhoff, 2015; Krouwel, Kutiyski, van Prooijen, Martinsson, & Markstedt, 2017). Political extremism is associated with a relatively simplistic outlook on the social and political world.

Overconfidence

The third psychological feature is that political extremists are overconfident in their judgments. This proposition is closely tied with the insight that political extremism predicts cognitive simplicity. While simplistic causal models of reality enable extremism by addressing the epistemic need to make the world more predictable (Kruglanski et al., 2006), they also enhance beliefs that one accurately understands reality. Put differently, people are more confident about judgment domains that seem simple.

Such overconfidence is reflected in findings that both left- and right-wing extremists consider their political

beliefs to be superior on a range of topics, including health care, immigration, and affirmative action, compared with moderates (Toner, Leary, Asher, & Jongman-Sereno, 2013). Belief superiority is a poor predictor of actual knowledge, however, and predicts a tendency to select agreeable but ignore disagreeable information (Hall & Raimi, 2018). Furthermore, political extremists display increased confidence in numeric estimation tasks (Brandt, Evans, & Crawford, 2015), suggesting overconfidence also in nonpolitical judgment domains.

Finally, one study assessed Dutch participants' domain-specific knowledge and judgmental certainty about the EU refugee crisis. Results revealed that left- and right-wing extremists did not differ from moderates in their domain-specific knowledge of this geopolitical event, yet they did experience increased judgmental certainty. Consistent with our theorizing, findings showed that the relationship between political extremism and judgmental certainty was statistically accounted for by the belief that the solution for the refugee crisis is simple (van Prooijen et al., 2018). The findings reviewed here suggest that political extremists—on both ends of the spectrum—are overconfident in their beliefs.

Intolerance

The final psychological feature is that political extremists are less tolerant of different groups and opinions than moderates. Through the combined processes of cognitive simplicity and overconfidence, extremists may experience their moral judgments as moral absolutes that reflect a simple and universal truth. Such moral superiority implies that different values and beliefs—and the groups of people who endorse them—are considered morally inferior. This line of reasoning is consistent with findings that strong moral convictions predict intolerance (Skitka, 2010).

Previous theorizing has often interpreted intolerance as a predominantly right-wing phenomenon. For instance, people on the right are more prejudiced of ethnic minorities than people on the left (e.g., Sears & Henry, 2003). Prejudice can apply to a broader range of social categories than minorities, however. Accumulating findings underscore that people on the political left and right are both prejudiced toward groups stereotypically associated with different ideologies. Examples of social categories subject to left-wing prejudice include Christians, businesspeople, and the military; examples of social categories subject to right-wing prejudice include ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, and feminists. For both the left and right, such prejudice is attributable to an ideological conflict that is based on the assumption that people with a different social identity also have different ideological beliefs (for an

overview, see Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, & Wetherell, 2014).

But whereas political orientation is a poorer predictor of intolerance than previously assumed, political extremism reliably predicts intolerance. In a large Dutch sample, participants on both extremes derogated outgroups more strongly than did politically moderate participants (van Prooijen et al., 2015). Furthermore, compared with moderates, both left- and right-wing extremists display stronger dogmatic intolerance, defined as the tendency to reject opposing beliefs, and consider any ideological belief that differs from their own to be inferior (van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2017). Political extremists are thus less tolerant than moderates about different ideological belief systems or the groups of people that endorse them.

Discussion

The four psychological features discussed here suggest that political extremism is fueled by feelings of distress and is reflected in cognitive simplicity, overconfidence, and intolerance. These insights are important to understanding how political polarization increases political instability and the likelihood of conflict between groups in society. Excessive confidence in the moral superiority of one's own ideological beliefs impedes meaningful interaction and cooperation with different ideological groups and structures political decision making as a zero-sum game with winners and losers. Strong moral convictions consistently decrease people's ability to compromise and even increase a willingness to use violence to reach ideological goals (Skitka, 2010). These processes are exacerbated by people's tendency to selectively expose themselves to people and ideas that validate their own convictions. For instance, both information and misinformation selectively spread in online echo chambers of like-minded people (Del Vicario et al., 2016).

This article extends current insights in at least three ways. First, the features proposed here help to explain why throughout the past century not only extreme-right but also extreme-left movements (e.g., socialism, communism) have thrived in times of crisis (Midlarsky, 2011). Second, understanding the mind-set of extremists in all corners of the political spectrum is important in times of polarization and populist rhetoric. The current propositions provide insights into why traditionally moderate parties in the EU have suffered substantial electoral losses. In particular, the support for well-established parties on the moderate left (e.g., social democrats) and moderate right (e.g., Christian democrats) has dropped in recent years, whereas the support for left- and right-wing populist parties has increased

(Krouwel, 2012). Third, the present arguments are based on evidence from multiple countries with different political systems (van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2017), which suggests that they apply to both two-party systems (e.g., the United States) and multiparty systems (e.g., many European countries).

Of importance, the features presented here can have both negative and positive societal implications. Many movements that were once considered radical have been responsible for important social change (e.g., human-rights movements). For instance, in the study by Tetlock and colleagues (1994), not only extreme slavery advocates but also extreme abolitionists showed decreased integrative complexity compared with people considered moderate at the time; however, few people nowadays would dispute that the abolitionists were morally right (it indeed requires little cognitive complexity to conclude that slavery is wrong). People can endorse both harmful oversimplifications and simple moral truths with high confidence; moreover, intolerance of hate-driven ideological movements (e.g., White supremacism) can be compatible with moral progress.

To conclude, although there are important psychological differences between people with left-wing and people with right-wing ideologies, there are also substantial similarities between left- and right-wing extremists that differentiate them from political moderates. The features presented here provide a psychological perspective on political extremism and contribute to a more complete understanding of how political ideology predicts human cognition, emotion, and behavior.

Recommended Reading

- Greenberg, J., & Jonas, E. (2003). (See References). A commentary illuminating how some of the effects often attributed to right-wing orientation might more accurately be attributed to political extremism.
- Hoffer, E. (1951). (See References). A classic and still relevant book analyzing radical belief systems.
- Kruglanski, A. W., Gelfand, M. J., Bélanger, J. J., Sheveland, A., Hetiarachchi, M., & Gunaratna, R. (2014). (See References). A review article using significance-quest theory to explain extremist ideologies.
- Midlarsky, M. L. (2011). (See References). An accessible macropolitical analysis of the societal conditions that facilitated the rise of extremist regimes throughout the 20th century.

Action Editor

Randall W. Engle served as action editor for this article.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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